

To Kill a Mockingbird
By Harper Lee
Rationale by Sameerah El-Jurf

Grade Level and Audience

In her novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), Harper Lee aimed her book at young adults however it is not limited to that audience. The book was written over 50 years ago and is still relevant to its modern readers. It is studied in schools, either in middle or high school, through the world because of its cultural and moral significance. *To Kill a Mockingbird* examines racism through the eyes of children, Jem and Scout Finch, in the Great Depression-era in Alabama. It's great for boys and girls ages 12 to 17 as it is a hopeful book. According to Scholastic.com, it is suitable for grades 6 to 12. It engages the reader with a reality that he or she may not have experienced in the "real" world, but which nevertheless offers truths in a way that is transforming to the reader. It offers us an awareness of the nature of mankind and allows us to connect across generations with those who have been changed by this read.

Today's students embrace Atticus, Scout, Jem, and Dill with the lens of their own generation. Harper Lee has endured that by understanding these characters we learn to understand what we, as a culture and society are about. Older generations remember how the book pushed them into this realm of questioning and wants to create that experience again for the newer generation. It is a book that helps us grow and move towards becoming a more understanding and accepting society, which is ultimately what we would like to have happen. It's a coming-of-age story making it perfect to be read in the eighth grade. It is a time in which students are starting to question and consider the perspectives of others, as Atticus says, "... to climb in someone's skin and walk around it."

Plot Summary

The novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* mainly revolves around a small family of three -- Atticus Finch, an attorney, and his two children, Scout and Jem. As the novel proceeds certain characters are linked with the three main characters to form a dramatic story of events, attitudes, prejudices and values. The novel is set in the quiet town of Maycomb; but the serenity is only superficial. The town is comprised of three communities: the white folk, the black community, and the 'white trash'. Outwardly there is peace among the three, but underneath prevails a combination of hostility, racial prejudices, and friendlessness. Jem and Scout go to school together. On their way to school, they pass the Radley house; it is a terrifying place to them, for it houses Boo Radley, who has been labeled a lunatic. At the same time, their curiosity pushes them to try out ways to make Boo come out of the house. Their overtures are, however, suppressed by Atticus who does not want them to torment Boo. The main plot of the novel revolves around the trial in which Atticus defends Tom Robinson, a black, from the allegations of Bob and Mayella Ewell. She is part of the 'white-trash' community. The tension is maintained throughout the trial as to whether Atticus would or would not win the case.

Though the audience feels strongly for Tom's plight and it is apparent that he is innocent, the jury delivers the verdict that Tom is guilty. The immediate response to this is extreme disappointment and dejection, but the jury's verdict is final. The children follow the case proceedings avidly and are inconsolable when their father loses the case. The events in the novel

build up to the singularly important and climactic scene of the courtroom, where Atticus tries to defend Tom Robinson. The case is lost simply because it was still impossible (despite statutory laws protecting them) for a black man to attain victory over a white in the South. This amply reveals the deeply ingrained racial prejudices still prevalent among the white society which cannot give an equal status to a black.

The relation between the children and Boo Radley resurfaces at the end, when it is Boo who saves them from imminent death at the hands of the vicious Bob Ewell. It is ultimately revealed that Boo is not a lunatic, but a simple-minded person with failing health and a childish attachment for Scout and Tom. The story of the mockingbird recited by Atticus is linked to the theme of the novel. It is considered a sin to kill a mockingbird, since it is a harmless bird which only sings to please others. Boo Radley and Tom Robinson are also harmless people. By letting Tom die, the sin of killing a mockingbird has been committed. But by not revealing the facts of Boo's heroism in rescuing the children, the sin is avoided, and Boo is left to his seclusion. Tom's death is a defeat of justice and an insult to humanity, and the readers can judge for themselves how much of a sin it is. The maturing of Scout and Jim is portrayed as well as the exemplary character of Atticus, who is without any racial prejudices or biased views. He is a highly ethical character, who chooses to fight against the 'old traditions' of his own community.

Literary Qualities, Redeeming Values, and Our Classroom

The United States is composed of many different cultures, ethnicities, religions, and races all of which should all be respected and treated with equality. Students of this generation need to be reminded about the history of racism of this country in order to gain a new perspective on what we still see today. Students need to become aware of the prejudices prevalent in our society and learn how to stand up for what is right by knowing what to say and how to say it as today's leaders are not showing the best example for our kids to learn from. In the media, we get messages that people of Middle Eastern descent cannot be trusted (remember the new and recent travel bans?) and a belief that Hispanics who do not speak English should go back to their country and an assumption that an African American is a threat at night in public stores.

Using Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a classic known for acceptance and hope, I will be teaching my 8th grade students a unit for its literary value. It fits well into the curriculum and the reading is at grade-level. The unit deals with many sensitive themes like racism, prejudice, education, society, human rights, and coming of age. Middle school students will soon go on to high school and most will begin working where they will need to be thinking about how to deal with the issue of prejudice outside of the classroom. Many students have already encountered instances prejudice or have partaken in fostering a form of discrimination. *To Kill a Mockingbird* really emphasizes on sympathy and understanding as a means to prevent discrimination. The power of nonviolent resistance can change counties and eventually nations, an example we all learned from King's famous "I had a dream" speech. The idea Atticus is trying to teach us and his daughter is the idea of, "if you can learn a simple trick, [Scout,] you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view [...] until you climb into his skin and walk around in

it,"(page 33) is a way to prevent discrimination and bigotry. It is important because it provokes ideas about how cultures and values differ among groups of people and how individuals, like Atticus, come to choose their own value system- something students are encouraged to as well. Young adults are outraged by injustice and will sympathize with Tom Robinson who is wrongfully accused. They'll admire Atticus who stands up against bigotry. They will examine the incidents in the novel and realize they reflect and mirror common day injustices.

False accusations of assault play a central role in the novel and the history of the Scottsboro Boys. While explicit depictions do not appear, it is important to allow students to comment or question the topic either within the context of the book or outside it. Studies say that 67% people under that age of 18, 34% of children under the age of 12 and 14% children under the age of six are victims of sexual assault. There are high chances, 50-90%, that they will develop post-traumatic stress disorder. Therefore, it is important to create a safe environment where our children can feel free to discuss these topics safely and openly (and if needed, get the help they need). Monitored and guided discussion at an early age equips students with the knowledge, skills and values to make responsible choices. Awareness is key to prevention and all schools have a zero tolerance policy towards offenders. It should be made clear to students that such behaviors will not go unnoticed. Students will learn that although Mayella falsely accused Tom in the trial to save face, she too is a victim of abuse. Just think of all the effect of physical, mental, and emotional abuse she endured. Her family name in society is automatically considered dirty, rude and worthless. Mayella is the misunderstood delinquent and her social and emotional development was that of a young child. She was unhappy, lonely, and abused. She too was discriminated against in society for being poor and from a bad family. That doesn't mean she is innocent, but she isn't all to blame. She never deserved the life she got.

By studying *To Kill a Mockingbird*, students will develop an understanding to the culture in the South in the 1930's. They'll understand how the atmosphere of the times not only influences this novel, but other historical events to come like Martin Luther King's speech and how we are currently dealing with the aftermath of those events like Black Lives Matter. The novel offers multiple opportunities for students to study different point of views and how it affects the story.

Since the novel is set in the 30's, Lee uses offensive language that are frowned upon today and certain students may take offense to it. However, I will create a safe environment where the language should not be a problem. It must be stressed that reading such language serves a strong purpose: to depict reality back then and reveal the hatred of the towns people of Alabama towards African Americans. The novel also informs about the black south, the civil rights movement, and the great depression era. The events mentioned in the novel do not show America's great moments, however time has shown gradual improvement and there is still much to learn about our mistakes; ideas can be introduced to create a more just world. For compassion to exist, there must injustice. This novel will allow students learn a lot about compassion and showing it to those who need it most through a number of activities.

Lee's novel is also about coming-of-age for Jem, Dill, and Scout. By understanding the theme, students will see how the children grow and mature and therefore are able to overcome obstacles in the story. The children lose their innocence and learn about many ugly truths- justice and common sense are simply not enough in that society. Jem matures socially, emotionally, physically, and mentally and casts off games of childhood and illusions of a fair world. They all realize that Atticus is a hero and that he is an interesting role model. In the 1930's, women were

treated as delicate and fragile- they were expected to also act and behave in the same manner they were treated. Scout's biggest concern is coming to terms with society's expectations.

The novel is also quite rich in literary elements like symbolism, theme, and characters to name a few and in which are important aspects that helps with the analysis of the story. Not only will we be learning about literary elements and sound devices, we will also be practicing critical thinking skill and going over theoretical framework and concepts to discuss its relevance to this novel. Throughout the unit, students will perform role plays, explore characters through quotations from the novel and learn to incorporate it into student writing. Student will examine what it means to be the "other" or an outsider by reading other related texts. We will focus on mythology and urban legends to examine Boo Radley. We will also have an opportunity to read poetry and explore allusions and symbols in birds. Students will examine attitudes and beliefs in the Jim Crow South and demonstrate the historical significance of Tom Robinson's character to the murder of Emmett Till and the Scottsboro boys. Finally, students will come to class dressed in character for a mock trial towards the end of the book.

We all need to come to the realization that this book is a must read! Students need to open their eyes to the truth the same way Scout responded to it. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is an accurate portrayal of the 1930's. Life will show everyone that there are groups of people that are discriminated for various reasons and any one of us can fall through that experience.

Alternative Books

Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption by Bryan Stevenson

The Girl Who Fell from the Sky by Heidi W. Durrow

Lay that Trumpet in Our Hands by Susan Carol McCarthy

Tell the Wolves I'm Home by Carol Rifka Brunt

Theoretical Support

- Maslow was concerned with how people develop their identity and humanness. He believed people develop their identity as they have their needs met and those needs formed a hierarchy, from the lowest, basic physical needs to highest, self-actualization. For example, a hungry child will not develop much intellectual curiosity. Lower level physical needs must be reasonably well satisfied before any individual will attend to higher levels (intellectual curiosity being among the self-actualization). Students will understand that the social hierarchy has a profound effect on the society in *TKAM*. Students can find quotes, compare and contrast the Ewell's and the Finch's needs and growths, and find themes for each tier by analyzing *TKAM*.
- Harper Lee also depicts the concept of Marxism throughout *TKAM*, which the society of its characters is divided into two classes: rich and poor. For example, in the novel, characterizations of Finches, Cunninghams, and Tom Robinson are utilized to represent different social classes.
- According to Piaget, children are born without innate ideas about reality and they are not entirely filled with knowledge by adults. He suggested that children engaged in constructivism, which is the construction of new understanding of the environment based

on their experiences. They do so by being curious and active explorers, observing their environment and experimenting. They used this knowledge to solve problems and revise their understanding to adapt better. The communication between a developing brain and experience is responsible for the child's movement from one stage to another. Piaget has laid out a very exact and defined course of development. Therefore, as an educator, it will become important to realize when my students have not moved on to a formal operational stage, and to help them to get there if they have not. I would attempt to help students to move on to a formal operational stage by introducing literature that introduces scenarios that require them to experience and view things they have little to no experience of. For example, Scout's experience with being introduced very quickly to both the worst parts and the best parts of mankind, through her experiences with Tom Robinson's unjust conviction and with Boo Radley after she and Jem are attacked, might help my students who are still in the early stages of formal development to move beyond their inherent idealism into a more realistic picture of the motivations of some people and their actions. By expanding the scope of their understanding on a literary level, I would hope to expand the depths to which their understanding can take them in their own lives.

- This also ties in Lev Vygotsky's theory as he believed that children's sociocultural environment plays an important role in how they develop cognitively. In Vygotsky's view, the acquisition of language is a crucial part of cognitive development. After children acquire language, they don't just go through a set series of stages. Rather, their cognitive development depends on interactions with adults, cultural norms, and their environmental circumstances; this is clearly seen between the Finch and Ewell family and how different the children are when compared to the rest of society.
- John Dewey's teaching philosophy is based on the belief that learning was active and schooling was unnecessarily long and restrictive. His idea was that children came to school to do things and live in a community which gave them real, guided experiences which fostered their capacity to contribute to society. Atticus treats everyone fairly; he thinks everyone should have the opportunity to be educated and go to school. He thinks school is important, and he thinks reading is VERY significant. He also taught Scout how to read even before she went to school. Teaching philosophy of John Dewey compared to Atticus' theory of education & the impact they both have on Scout. Scout doesn't feel like she needs to go to school because she already knows how to read. She thinks reading is the most important skill, because of what Atticus has told her. She doesn't like school, because she feels it is too slow paced because she is more advanced than the other kids in her grade.
- This relates with Bruner's constructivist theory. Bruner believed that when children start to learn new concepts, they need help from teachers and other adults in the form of active support (scaffolding). To begin with, they are dependent on their adult support, but as they become more independent in their thinking and acquire new skills and knowledge, the support can be gradually faded. This form of structured interaction between the child and the adult is reminiscent of the scaffolding that supports the construction of a building. It is gradually dismantled as the work is completed. Students can relate to both the novel and by learning in the classroom.
- Bloom's Taxonomy will be used to help students independently evaluate *TKAM*. Instead of teaching my students how to answer questions about a particular text, I help them develop the skills to critically evaluate *TKAM* without relying on outside guidance. Using

Bloom's learning domains, levels of understanding breaks down complex questions into smaller parts and outline the steps necessary for students to develop a sound evaluation of a text. Students will begin with the most basic and fundamental skill, comprehension, and then move on to reader response, analysis, and synthesis, and gradually build to the highest skill, evaluation.

- Gardner's theory on multiple intelligence allows us to use differentiation to motivate students in the classroom by devising lessons that target multiple human intelligences and helps students discover the multifaceted, real-world applications of this material. Gardner's theory helps teachers recognize potential in all students. Students are given a menu-option in the class and for their assessments.
- Critical Pedagogy is another approach that promotes critical analysis of certain notions in society. The objectives of Critical Pedagogy are to empower the powerless and transform existing social inequalities and injustices. Atticus does this and teaches his children the importance of thinking for themselves aside from cultural ideologies. To reach this ultimate goal, instructional practices should be committed to social transformation by uniting with the marginalized and subordinated groups. Such a critical perspective will offer analyses in terms of race, gender, power and class, and literary texts provide the best means to achieve that. Critical inquiry is a questioning/ problem-posing approach which allows us teachers to raise students as active citizens by improving their abilities to examine their worlds critically, to critique social institutions, to question textbooks and media, to inquire into power relations, and to express themselves freely with evidence and insight so as to create a more just society.
- The nature vs. nurture theory is stressed in this novel. We do not yet know how much of what we are is determined by our DNA and how much by our life experience. We know that both play a part. To begin with, *To Kill a Mockingbird* makes some points about gender roles especially those of women because it is very much about growing up as a female in the South. The female role is defined as being weak and fragile; and Scout is reprimanded for not conforming to the role that is required by her gender as a female particularly as a Southern Lady. Gender is shaped by the environment but it is not the only factor. No matter how much effort Aunt Alexandra puts into molding Scout into the shape of a Southern Lady, she is unsuccessful. This indicates that gender is inherent. In addition, the fact that Jem is attracted to masculine activities despite his father's indifference also highlights that gender is a product of biology. In addition, *To Kill a Mockingbird* makes some important points about self-identity in contrast to gender identity. The message Lee is trying to convey is that one should seek personal identity rather than gender identity without feeling restrained by the rigidly defined gender roles. By satirizing Southern womanhood through such characters as Miss Merriweather and Aunt Alexandra, and by creating the character of Atticus who serves as a guide for Scout to find her personal identity, Lee is trying to convey the same message.

Summary of Reviews

A year after its publication, *To Kill a Mockingbird* won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. The Pulitzer represents "distinguished fiction" written by an American author. A panel of judges reads through candidates' works published that year, preferably pieces that focus on life in the U.S., and announces finalists for the award annually. The judges then determine if one book stands out for recognition. The Pulitzer Prize represents not only the most famous but also the most illustrious award for literature to many.

Bestsellers magazine also opted to award Lee's novel, bestowing its Paperback of the Year award on "To Kill a Mockingbird" in 1962. In 1961, the book received the Brotherhood Award of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, a group founded in 1927 -- renamed in the 1990s as the National Conference for Community and Justice -- dedicated to promoting religious, racial, gender and social equity and diversity.

Lee's book continued to receive accolades more than 40 years after its publication. For instance, American librarians selected "To Kill a Mockingbird" as the best novel of the 1900s. The book was the top selection for inclusion in city reading programs in 2004, and the audio book version won the award for fiction in the Selected Audiobooks for Young Adults category in 2001. President George W. Bush bestowed the Presidential Medal of Freedom upon Lee for her novel in 2007, citing the influence of the novel on American culture as part of his reasoning.

In 1962, a movie version came out starring Gregory Peck, who won an Oscar Academy Award for his role as Atticus Finch. The movie also won for best writing of an adaptation and best art direction for a black-and-white film. The movie received other nominations including best picture.

Awards Earned By Harper Lee

Pulitzer Prize (1961)

Brotherhood Award of the National Conference of Christians and Jews (1961)

Alabama Library Association Award (1961)

Bestsellers Paperback of the Year Award (1962)

Member, National Council on the Arts (1966)

Best Novel of the Century, Library Journal (1999)

Alabama Humanities Award (2002)

ATTY Award, Spector Gadon& Rosen Foundation (2005)

Los Angeles Public Library Literary Award (2005)

Honorary degree, University of Notre Dame (2006)

American Academy of Arts and Letters (2007)

Presidential Medal of Freedom (2007)

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